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SUBJECT: LARGE SCALE FOOD DISTRIBUTION REINITIATED IN ZIMBABWE

REF: (A) Harare 1318 (B) Harare 1507

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Summary  
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1. Large-scale international food aid operations have once more begun in Zimbabwe. The World Food Program, which recently concluded protracted negotiations with the Zimbabwean Government on an MOU governing food assistance operations, has started large-scale food distributions through its traditional NGO partners. We expect the scale of assistance to continue increasing over the coming months, likely peaking with the height of the hungry season in February. The Government of Zimbabwe (GOZ) estimated number of beneficiaries remains at an artificially low figure of 2.9 million people, when actual need is likely more than 5 million. WFP (along with donors) will monitor the levels of food insecurity and intends to further scale-up distributions based on actual needs and food availability. Other constraints to international efforts include lack of resources (food, money and staff) and logistical bottlenecks. Post is working with WFP and major NGOs to resolve these issues. This is the first in a series of cables that will provide regular updates about Zimbabwe's food crisis and international assistance efforts. End summary.

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MOU Signed, Large Scale Food Assistance Resumes  
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2. After a hiatus of more than a year, the World Food Program (WFP) and the Consortium for Southern Africa Food Security Emergency (C-SAFE, an NGO consortium comprised of World Vision, CARE, and Catholic Relief Services) have restarted large-scale food assistance in Zimbabwe. In 2004, the GOZ prohibited large-scale distribution of food aid and restricted international food agencies to special feeding programs. However, at the end of September 2005, the GOZ re-opened the door for larger-scale distribution by approving plans for WFP to distribute 300,000 MT of food aid to up to 2.9 million rural Zimbabweans and both WFP and C-SAFE began limited implementation of Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF: large-scale, free food distribution to vulnerable households) for rural residents of 37 districts, and C-SAFE prepared to distribute in 12 other districts.

3. On December 1, after several months of negotiations, the GOZ and WFP signed an MOU governing food distribution. The MOU preserves the role of WFP's traditional NGO partners, something the GOZ had attempted to limit. The jointly agreed guidelines for the NGO food operations do limit GOZ involvement in distribution of the aid and prohibit the use of food aid for political purposes. With the MOU signed, VGF feeding will now scale up in earnest through January 2006, with WFP and C-SAFE hoping to reach at least 2.9 million and 726,000 beneficiaries, respectively. In addition, school feeding, Food for Work (FFW), the urban Market Assistance Program (MAP) and other smaller targeted programs continue. (Comment: The timing of the MOU signing, coming after the Senate elections and before the arrival of UN Under Secretary General for

Humanitarian Affairs Jan Egeland, was not accidental.)

14. In a further sign that the GOZ's attitude toward food assistance is softening, after months of fruitless effort (reftel A), C-SAFE has now been able to obtain import permits and health certificates for all the food intended for Zimbabwe that is currently waiting in Durban. In addition, no NGO has reported any significant recent interference by government authorities in the beneficiary registration or food distribution process, though there have been some attempts. In one case, when ruling party officials tried to hold a political rally at a food distribution, the implementing partner suspended the distribution and, a few days later, returned to distribute without incident.

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Still discord over VGF Numbers  
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15. The GOZ's estimate of 2.9 million food insecure people, cited in the MOU with WFP, is based on the national Vulnerability Assessment Committee's annual assessment. As we have reported previously (reftel B), this number was based on a number of flawed assumptions some of which, such as the assumption that incomes would keep pace with the rising price of maize and that 100% of household income would be spent to buy cereal, are already unraveling. WFP believes and we concur that a more accurate estimate of people needing food assistance in the country is probably a 5-6 million figure.

16. WFP's strategy is to start with the distributions as planned, closely monitor the level of people in need of food assistance, and use data from this monitoring to further scale-up as needed, depending on food availability. Although some GOZ Ministers (notably the Minister of Social Welfare, Goche) have stated that 2.9 million beneficiaries is a cap on total food assistance, WFP reports that it views this figure as a base and does not intend to be bound by this limitation if needs are demonstrated to be greater - as is anticipated.

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Other Constraints  
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17. Other constraints to rapid scale-up of the VGF relate to resources (food, money and staff) and logistics. WFP and C-SAFE were forced to reduce their original distribution plans for October and November, both because of insufficient food resources on hand and because partners needed time to rebuild their implementation capacity. To increase food stocks, WFP borrowed against donor pledges to make regional purchases, FFP deployed pre-positioned US commodities, and C-SAFE collected on loans made to other food aid programs in the region. As a result, there is now sufficient food in the region for both WFP and C-SAFE to meet the planned December distributions - subject to staffing and logistical constraints. Of WFP's total planned distribution of 300,000 MT through June 2006, it currently has 205,000 MT pledged from international donors. C-SAFE is in the process of reexamining its food supply through June 2006 (calculating pledged amounts and food en route versus needs); we hope to have C-SAFE's figures in the near future.

18. The lack of experienced NGO staff has also slowed the VGF scale-up. NGOs were reluctant to re-staff over initial uncertainty of donor funding. The funding issues are being addressed, but the NGOs also face challenges hiring and retaining implementing staff because the contract periods they can offer are short, providing limited job security.

19. Logistical issues have been and are likely to continue to be a major constraint. The surge in demand to move food from South Africa is straining transport capacities. C-SAFE, in particular, is experiencing difficulty moving food into Zimbabwe, largely because of the decision by its newly-contracted dispatcher to try rail transport rather than trucking, which has proven to be an ill-timed, failed experiment. Rail transport has proven to be slow and inefficient. Zimbabwe's fuel shortage and truckers' increasing payment demands provoked by triple-digit and rising inflation have caused frequent delays for all partners. All parties concerned are pressing hard for a solution to this critical problem and post will continue to monitor this issue closely.

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